

FROM CITIZEN APATHY TO PARTICIPATION

by

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FROM CITIZEN APATHY TO PARTICIPATION

I propose to point up a few propositions which I believe to be of considerable pertinence in the field of "From Citizen Apathy to Participation. " There are those who in a brief presentation of this nature could present a formula guaranteed to guide the way "From Citizen Apathy to Participation. " I know of no such formula. I know of no short cut which in the end does not prove to be a short circuit blowing at least one of the fuses of the organization. I know that building a community organization or circumstances for citizen participation is hard, tedious, tough and at many points a rough experience. I have been concerned by the fact that too many individuals working in this field not only have stars in their eyes but seem to operate as though they had stars in their heads. They have emerged from classroom cocoons armed with an assortment of weapons known as techniques and have Don Quixote-like sallied forth to organize communities and win citizen participation. They come forth dragging two heavy anchors which must be dropped if they are ever to be free to sail to their objective.

First and foremost are aspects of their formal training, which emphasize order, system and logic. Where human behavior is neatly catalogued into social factors, economic factors, political psychological, etc. Where problems find their orderly places behind tabs labeled housing, delinquency, race relations, health, etc. Where decisions are reached on the basis of logic.

One must admit that this is a substantial handicap for a person who then finds himself in a world where neither motivations nor problems are neatly separated; where everything is involved and muddled with everything else; where the scene is one of disorder and strife, and where irrationality rules the roost, with logic coming around as any line of reason which supports your decision.

Since it is imperative that the effective community organizer be familiar with and comfortable in this array of seeming disorder, passion and irrationality of the world in which he is working - it becomes essential that he divest himself of those rigid, unrealistic, orderly views which he so patiently assimilated in some formal institutions of alleged learning. Paradoxically, he must learn to see and understand the world in its disorder in order to be able to think and act in an orderly and logical manner.

The other anchor which must be dropped is, I choose to call here, "the success conditioning" which again is part of our formal education and acts as a curse upon our working in this, or as a matter of fact, any creative field. I am referring to the traditions of our educational background whereby the emphasis is to always succeed, to pass every course, to get the best grades possible, to succeed to honor societies and to avoid at all costs a failure. In the field of citizen participation creative and imaginative thinking is one of the major requirements. This involves a willingness to experiment, which means not to fear failure but rather to accept it as a frequent companion to any kind of experimental thinking. Failure becomes not failure, but simply a signpost pointing in another direction. There are few fields outside of community organization or working with people which demand the imagination and flexibility of approach so necessary in this area.

Today I propose to present a few propositions which, from our experience, are fundamental to a realistic understanding and working in this field.

During a recent conversation with two New York educators, one of whom is probably more familiar with various attempts and programs in the field of citizen participation in the different parts of the United States than anyone else in the country, I was asked the question "Have you ever deliberately created a conflict situation for purposes of civic participation or community organization?" My reply of, "Certainly, frequently, as a matter of fact constantly" momentarily upended the conversation. It was as though I had made a grave self-incriminatory confession.

Let us candidly examine this issue. To do so we must look at it nakedly and unashamedly. We must, of necessity, undress it of its garments of gobbledy gook, its veils of verbalisms and its accessories and accouterments of high morals, respectability and of doing good. These clothes carry different labels. Many of these labels are old retreads such as "Citizen Participation;" "Mobilizing Community Resources;" "Getting the People to Lift Themselves by Their Own Bootstraps;" "Grassroots;" "Gearing the Community Into the Democratic Process;" "Coordinating the Community's Resources;" "Organizing Citizens So that They Assume Their Rights and Obligations;" "Self Help;" to other flashy slogans such as "Breaking Through the Silence Barrier" or to the terribly tiresome one of "Operation Something or Other."

These are the clothes; now let us look at the body, the body which we assume is a disorganized community, populated by a demoralized citizenry existing in apathy and anonymity; a people neither caring for others nor expecting others to care for them; in short a people who have become disinterested in assuming and discharging the responsibilities of citizenship. The job as it is generally seen is one to so organize the community that there will be a vital, healthy, active citizen participation.

I suggest at this point that we are looking at a mythical body which is a figment of some seminar's imagination. There is no such animal as a disorganized community. It is a contradiction in terms to use the two words together of "disorganized community." The word community itself implies an organized, communal life; people living in an organized fashion. These people in the community which concern us may have experienced successive frustrations to the point that their will to participate has seemingly atrophied. They may be living in anonymity and starved for personal recognition. They may be suffering from various forms of deprivation and discrimination. They may have accepted anonymity and resigned in apathy. They may despair and feel hopeless about their children inheriting a little better world. From your point of view they may be representing a very negative form of existence, but the fact is that they are organized in that way of life. Call it organized apathy or organized non-participation, but that is their community pattern. They are living under a certain set of arrangements, standards, accepted modus operandis and a way of life. They may in short have surrendered - but life goes on in an organized form; even if it is as Thoreau described about most lives as being one of "quiet desperation."

Therefore, if your function is to attack apathy and create citizen participation it is in actual fact an attack upon the prevailing patterns of organized living in the community. Here I would like to state my first proposition; the first function of community organization is community disorganization. Disorganization of the accepted circumstances and the status quo of the arrangements under which they live. These circumstances and arrangements

must be disorganized if they are to be displaced with changed patterns providing the opportunities and means for citizen participation. All change means disorganization of the old and organization of the new.

This must be clearly recognized in order to understand why we are therefore immediately confronted with a conflict situation. That organizer dedicated to changing the character of life of a particular community has an initial function of serving as an abrasive agent to rub raw the resentments of the people of the community; to fan the latent hostilities of many of the people to a point of overt expression; to search out controversial issues,* rather than to avoid them, for unless an issue is controversial it means that people are not sufficiently concerned about it to feel deeply and to act; to stir up dissatisfaction and discontent; to provide a channel into which they can angrily pour their frustrations of the past; to create a mechanism which can drain off underlying guilts for having accepted the previous situation for so long a time. This mechanism, medium, or channel, is the community organization, which apart from its function as the instrument of implementation is indispensable for the successful carrying out of this present stage, but more on this point later.

The job then is getting them to move, to be active, to participate, in short, to develop and harness that power necessary to effectively conflict with the prevailing patterns and to change them. When those prominent in the status quo turn and label you as an "agitator" they are completely correct, for that is, in one word, your function - to agitate to the point of conflict.

A sound analogy is to be found in the field of economic organization or trade unions. A competent union organizer approaches his objective of organization, a particular industrial plant where the workers are underpaid, suffering from discriminatory practices, and lacking in any job security. The workers accept these conditions as inevitable, and express their demoralization in a "what's the use" apathy. In private they resent these circumstances, complain, talk about the futility¹ of "bucking the big shots" and generally succumb in frustration all because of the lack of opportunity for effective action. This is then described as apathy.

Enter the labor organizer or the agitator. He begins "his trouble making" by stirring up these angers, frustrations, resentments and highlighting specific issues or grievances which step up controversy. He dramatizes the injustices by comparisons with conditions at other industrial plants engaged in the same kind of work where the workers are far better off economically in terms of wages, working conditions, job security, health benefits, pensions as well as other advantages which had not even been thought of by the workers he is trying to organize. Just as important, he points out that the workers in the other places had also been exploited in the past and had existed under similar circumstances; until they utilized their intelligence and energies to organize into a power instrument known as a trade union, with the consequence of achieving all of these other benefits. Generally this approach results in the formation of a new trade union.

*The use of the adjective "controversial" to qualify the word "issue" is a meaningless redundancy. There can be no such thing as a "non-controversial" issue. When there is agreement there is no issue; issues only arise when there is disagreement or controversy.

Let us examine what this labor organizer has done. He has taken a group of workers in the circumstances described who were immobilized by their feelings of hopelessness (or apathy); he has fanned their resentments and hostilities by a number of means, including challenging contrasts of better conditions of other workers in similar industries. Most important, he has demonstrated that something can be done, and that there is a concrete way of doing it which has already proven its effectiveness and success. That by organizing together into a power group, or conflict group here called a trade union, they will have the power and the instrument with which to make these changes. He now has the workers acting (or participating) in a trade union and supporting its program. We must never forget that so long as there is no opportunity or the means or modus operandi to make changes it is senseless to get people agitated or angry, leaving them no course or action except the personal one of "blowing one's top. "

This brings us to the second proposition; the character of the means or tools through which change can be effected must be clearly understood by the people at all times - it is power through organization.

And so the labor organizer simultaneously breeds conflict and builds a power structure. The war between the trade union and management is resolved either through a strike or a negotiation. Either method is one involving the use of power; the economic power of the strike or the threatened economic power which results in successful negotiations. No individual or organization can negotiate without the power to compel negotiation. Following this conflict the prevailing circumstances or power pattern of that factory's life is changed.

This in essence is the function of a community organizer. Anything otherwise is wishful non-thinking. To attempt to operate on good will rather than on a power basis would be to attempt something which the world has not yet experienced - remember to make even good will effective it must be mobilized into a power unit.

This brings us our third proposition - prevailing arrangements or power patterns can only be altered by power.

Here, it is important that we pause and examine the words which are being used in this discussion. This is a prime issue if we are to achieve any understanding of points of view. It was obvious earlier in this presentation that such terms as "agitation," "to rub raw the resentments," "to stir up dissatisfaction and discontent," "create conflict," were harsh words grating and jarring on many ears which prefer phrases such as "stimulating citizen participation." There is a critical point where our tongue traps our mind. We become involved in bypaths of confusion or semantics. This is particularly the case when the word power has through time acquired overtones and undertones of sinister, corrupt, evil, unhealthy, immoral, machiavellian, and a general phantasmagoria of the nether regions. It is a word so generally suspect that it is to be avoided as the plague. The moment the word power is mentioned it is as though a Pandora's box had been opened exuding the stench of the devil's cess pool of corruption, and everything evil and unhealthy.

Whenever the word power is mentioned sooner or later somebody will quote the classical statement of Lord Acton and quote it as follows:

"Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely " This will be the quotation expounded by ninety nine out of one hundred persons familiar with the fact that Lord Acton did make that statement, when in actual fact the correct quotation is, "Power tends to

corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Lord Acton never said, nor intended to say, that power in itself was corrupt because he knew that power in itself is absolutely amoral; but the stigma which now hangs on the word is such that we even corrupt anything which is said concerning the concept of power, such as Lord Acton's statement. The corruption of the concept of power is not in power, but rather in ourselves.

Power is the very essence of life, the dynamo of life. It is the power of the heart pumping blood and sustaining life in the physical body and the power of active citizen participation pulsing upwards providing a unified strength for a common purpose of organization. Power is an essential life force always in operation, either changing circumstances or opposing change. Power, or organized energy, may be used to make mankilling explosives or lifesaving drugs. Power within a gun may be used to take or save life, to enforce slavery, or to achieve freedom. The morality of the use of power is not in the power instrument but in the user. Power must be clearly seen without the stains of popular prejudices - it must be understood for what it is, for the part it plays in our general life if we are to effectively organize communities for anything, including citizen participation.

It is well to reflect upon the words of Pascal, who was definitely not a cynic, "Justice without power is impotent; power without justice is tyranny."

Becoming allergic to the use of the word power, we become averse to thinking in those terms. We strive to invent sterilized synonyms cleansed of the opprobrium of the word power, and the new words in themselves mean something different; so that they tranquilize us and begin to shepherd or lead our mental processes off the main, conflict-ridden, hard, bitter, grimy and realistic power paved highway of life, down the sweeter smelling, peaceful, more socially acceptable and more respectably palatable byways.* The inevitable result is a definite straying or failure to achieve an honest understanding of the issues with which we must come to grips if we are to do the job. We must understand the power concept as it is, without the sordid raiment which in effect serve more as disguises for our own inability or unwillingness or timidity to get into a battle in which we may get hurt.

We must rid ourselves of our fear of getting our own hands dirty and our own jobs made insecure. Possibly we do not want to face up to the issue or the nature of power, but we prefer to keep it framed in the popular context of corruption and immorality as a defense, an excuse to avoid entering the arena of conflict; to continue to discuss and examine all ways and means which avoid a frontal recognition and acceptance of the concept of power. Until the time of acceptance there can be no understanding and community organization will continue to be, as with rare exceptions it has been, a small group of self appointed leaders who are "coordinating" with nobody doing the work to be coordinated. They will be accepted by all parts of the community because they do not represent a threat to any part. They will always be concerned with conferences dealing with "New Horizons in Community Organization" because they don't know what to do with the present horizons. In short, lacking an understanding or familiarity with the issue of power, they are powerless and ineffective. A true understanding of the principles,

* It is obvious that there is a vast difference in the attitude and the probable actions of the organizer when he faces an organizational project in terms of power as over against his attitude when he conceives and thinks of his job as "harnessing, mobilizing and coordinating the total community resources."

practices, purposes or the actual character of any popular organization, whether it be for economic, political, religious or social goals such as community organization - demands an understanding of the concept of power. The only reason people have ever banded together, past, present or future, is so that through organization they can create a power instrument with which to implement or realize their desires or needs, or their program. There never has been any other reason. This must be clearly understood and accepted. Every slogan of organization, ranging from "In Union There Is Strength" to "The Propagation of the Faith" all attest to this simple fact. While this is laboring the obvious, the fact is that the obvious is often glossed over because of its obviousness. We come dangerously close to missing this central thesis or *raison d'etre* for organization. Even when we talk of a community lifting itself by its own bootstraps we are talking of power. It takes a great deal of power to lift oneself by one's own bootstraps. Try it and see.

To this point we have addressed ourselves to certain propositions directly related to our purpose of effective organization of citizens for action or participation. Now let us direct our attention to certain propositions in the area of process. Process is how it is done while purpose is why it is done. In a true functional sense it is academic to draw a line of demarcation between process and purpose, as they are part of a single continuum. They proceed together, each so closely welded to the other that it is extremely difficult to mark where one leaves off and the other begins, or which is which. The very process of democratic citizen participation resulting in the ridding of apathy is more of the fundamental purpose of the organization rather than the professed purpose of ridding the alleys of dirt. At this point process is really purpose.

It is therefore with considerable reservations that, for the purposes of this discussion that I comment on process as though it were an entity apart from the general stream of organizational life.

The guiding star here (as in the purpose) is embraced in those words, "The dignity of the individual." Working with this compass many axioms of effective organization quickly show themselves.

If you respect the dignity of the individual with whom you are working then their desires, not yours; their values, not yours; their ways of working and fighting, not yours; their choice of leadership, not yours; their programs, not yours is what is important and to be accepted.

At this point the question may arise, "What if the program of the local people is against other peoples, for reasons of color, religion, economic status or politics? Is this the program to be accepted just because it is their program?" The answer is categorically in the negative. At first glance this would be a position of inconsistency insofar as we have just emphasized the importance of accepting "their program." Yet, we are not in an inconsistent position, when we remember the preceding statement that "the guiding star here is embraced in those words 'the dignity of the individual'." This is the purpose of the program. Obviously, a program of a community which opposes people because of such factors as race, religion, creed or economic status is one which is the antithesis of the fundamental issues of the dignity of the individual.

It is difficult for people to believe that you really respect their dignity (after all, they

know very few people including their own neighbors who do) and that you really believe in and with them; but no more difficult than it is for you to really accept this thesis and surrender that little image of God created in our own likeness, which lurks in all of us so that we secretly believe that we know better what's best for the people. A successful organizer is characterized by the fact that he has learned to emotionally as well as intellectually respect the dignity of the people with whom he is working. In this regard an effective organizational experience is as much of a significant educational process for the organizer as it is for the people with whom he is working. They both must learn to respect the dignity of the individual, and they both must learn that in the last analysis this is the basic reason or purpose for organization, for citizen participation is one facet, and a most important one, of this basic philosophic precept of the democratic way of life.

We learn that when we respect the dignity of the people we work with that they cannot be denied the elementary right to participate as fully as possible in the working out of their own problems. That they must have that vital self-respect which arises out of their having played an active role in resolving their own crises rather than being in the degraded position of being helpless, passive, puppet-like recipients of special private or public services. To give people help without their having played a significant part in the action makes the help itself relatively valueless and contributes nothing to the development of the individual that you are ostensibly "helping. " In the deepest sense it is not giving but taking; taking from their dignity. Denial of the opportunity for participation is denial of human dignity and democracy. It will not work.

In May of 1943 President Camacho of Mexico decided to pay tribute to the Mothers of Mexico. He issues a proclamation that every mother whose sewing machine was being held by the Monte de Piedad (National pawn shop of Mexico) should have her machine returned as a gift on Mother's Day. There was tremendous joy over the occasion. Here was a gift being made outright, without any participation on the part of the recipients. Inside of three weeks every single one of the sewing machines was back again in the pawn shop.

Another example occurred recently in a statement made by the United Nations delegate from Liberia. In the course of his speech analyzing some of the problems which beset Liberia he commented that his country had been deprived "of the benefits of a previous history of colonialism. " News accounts of this comment were published with accompanying editorial comments of astonishment and ridicule.

In actual fact the statement of the United Nations representative from Liberia was one showing insight and wisdom. The people of Liberia had never been exploited by a colonial power, never been forced to band together and at the risk of great personal sacrifice to participate in a movement to secure their own freedom. They had not participated in the securing of their freedom but had been given it immediately upon the establishment of their nation. Even freedom as a gift is deficient in dignity.

The literature of man is replete with illustrations making this point again and again from time immemorial. Finley Peter Dunne's immortal Mr. Dooley put it,

"Don't ask f'r rights. Take thim. An' don't let anny wan give thim to ye.
A right that is handed to ye fer nawthin has somethin the mather with it.

It's more than likely it's only a wrong turned inside out."

One last word on "process." Let us remember the saying of the oracle at Delphi "Nothing in excess."

We face a danger in undue emphasis of attention on process, so that we may well lose sight of the purpose. Too much concern with process reaches a point, as is obvious, in a number of parts of this field, whereby the devotion to process has not only resulted in the loss of purpose, but it becomes an academic greenhouse for the nurturing of intellectual seedlings which could never grow in the hard, cold world outside. It is like some of the meetings in one particular organization where the insistence on democratic discussion and participation by every member of the group, with constant delays of decision making finally reaches a point where many of the most vital members have lost their patience and dropped out of active participation. Process here has reached the point of the old adage in medicine, "The operation was a success, but the patient died." Preoccupation with process can also become a rationalizing escape from the grimy ordeal of organization. I have emphasized certain propositions and set up certain observations primarily because we must learn to understand general principles in our work, and to consciously relate these principles in our work. Failing to do this we will operate episodically, learning nothing except the experience of the most recent immediate episode. The purpose of the organization then becomes one of survival, and it has outlived its reason for existence.

The Community Organization should provide a constant meaningful educational experience for as many of the participating citizenry as possible. The Organization has to be used in every possible sense as an educational mechanism. Education and not propaganda. Education in the truest sense whereby the membership will begin to make sense out of their relationship as individuals to the Organization and the world in which they live, so that they can make informed and intelligent judgments. The stream of activities and programs of the Organization provides a never-ending series of specific issues and situations which create a rich field for the learning process.

The examination of each specific issue leads to a speedily enlarging area of interest. Competent organizers should be sensitive to these opportunities. Lacking the learning process the building of an Organization becomes simply the substitution of one power group for another, without any resolution of the issue of citizen participation.

The problem of From Apathy to Citizen Participation is the key issue of our times. To date experience points to the democratic way of life as the best combination of political freedom, economic security and social opportunity in man's search for that society in which he can best fulfill himself as an individual.

The democratic process, based upon popular franchise, has its roots deep into the general populous. These roots depend upon a healthy, active and participating citizenry for the sustenance of the democratic life.

Lacking a constant flow of democratic power generated by the dynamo of the people, the democratic system becomes gradually drained of its vitality and substance until democracy dies. Consideration of the issue From Apathy to Participation is consideration of the very heart of the democratic process - its seat of life and its mortal point of vulnerability.